

A Love Story in Seven Songs by Madame_Ashley

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Summary:

"I don't think this nightmare is over, but I don't know what to do to stop it."

"I'm not going to make the mistake of doubting you again."

A slow-burning Jopper fanfic with some fluff, some sexy stuff, told from alternating perspectives.

1. Rebel Rebel

It is a rare week that passes when Hopper doesn't find himself on the Byers' doorstep for some reason or another. He has made his share of explanations for these unannounced visits, and once he has run out of explanations, he makes excuses instead. His motives start out viable enough: "I thought Jonathan could use some help repairing that hole in the front wall" or "Flo and the boys at the station put together some comics for Will to read until he's good to come home." Gratefully, Joyce never suggests that Hopper visit her son in the hospital - something he'd prefer not to do for reasons he'd prefer not to discuss.

Once Will is back in Joyce's care, Hopper continues to check in at regular intervals, whether on or off-duty. He tells himself that he would do this for any family who had experienced what Joyce and her kids had been through. He's just being a good cop, just being a good man, although he has moments when he sincerely doubts that he is either of these things. On occasion, Jim tries to convince himself that he comes by to offer Joyce protection, but he acknowledges the absurdity of this idea. Here is a woman in possession of an axe-wielding determination to defend her own truth – even alone and under immense emotional pressure. Ms. Byers is not in need of anyone else's fortification. Hopper feels protective anyway.

It is Christmas Eve. He's made his requisite appearance at the station house party, followed by a necessary gesture of penance in the woods. He has never been a religious man, but neither is he a stranger to guilt. After pausing briefly at the site of his offering, Hopper wanders back to the road. The time of year weighs on him as he turns the key in the ignition, and contemplates the long evening ahead. He considers the ounces of whiskey it will take to erase the traces of another winter's night spent nodding off in a small room thrumming with machines, his little girl continuing her slow, inevitable fade.

Jim means to head home, but as is becoming more often the case, he instead finds himself pulling into the Byers' gravel driveway. He wonders grimly what his story will be tonight, and it occurs to him

that people can be particular about unexpected company around the holidays. Perhaps his presence, while usually welcome, might be seen as intrusive given the occasion. How should he explain himself: "Hey Joyce, I was just about to turn in for an evening of drunken despair, when I thought I'd stop by to wish you Merry Christmas." Honesty, in this case, probably wasn't the best policy.

Deciding he'd figure out something to say on the way in, Hopper cuts the engine and approaches the house, sensing something unusual about the place. Loud noises are emanating from the typically funereal Byers' residence, sounds that as he gets closer he identifies as music. Since no one is going to hear him knocking over the reverberation of Bowie at top volume, Jim tries the door and lets himself in.

Once inside, he can hear Joyce and the boys shouting along with the song. Hopper has been standing bewildered by the front door for some time when Joyce comes out of Jonathan's room still strutting and singing: "Hot tramp! I love you so!" She stops dead when she sees him, emitting a slight shriek. "Jesus, Hop, how long have you been out here!"

Seeing that her face is already reddening with embarrassment, Hopper suppresses his laughter, but just barely. Joyce is flustered in a way he has never seen before; for once, her dark eyes are lit up with excitement rather than anxiety. She is smiling shyly as she explains that Jonathan has been making Will these great mixed tapes and that they've been really bonding over music. Her eyes are darting everywhere, never meeting Hopper's steady gaze. At last she exhales, adding that she's always loved this song, and that they all "got kind of carried away."

While she speaks in the meandering way she has, she's doing that fluttery thing with her hands, a gesture which Hopper finds inexplicably disarming. Trying to maintain a casual demeanor, he assumes his preferred cop stance, hands on hips, eyebrows raised. "Last time I checked, Joyce," he drawls. "It was called 'having a good time.'"

The cassette player clicks to a stop, and Jonathan and Will appear in the hallway. The older boy gives Hopper a nod of acknowledgement,

but his little brother looks concerned, mistaking Jim's somewhat stricken expression for a sign of trouble: "Everything okay, sir?" In spite of his recent ordeal, Will's face has retained much of its wide-eyed innocence, warming and breaking Hopper's heart at the same time. Jim takes a deep, dramatic breath then says with a smirk, "Yep, everything's fine. Just investigating a noise complaint. Now that your mother has calmed down, I think I can safely call it a night." Will giggles, and Jonathan manages a small smile, but Joyce's laugh is most surprising, and now it's Hopper's turn to feel self-conscious.

Before an awkward silence can descend, Jonathan remarks that he and Will are going to listen to side two, and motions the younger boy back into the bedroom. Joyce heads to the kitchen, obviously in search of a cigarette, and Hopper follows her thinking that he could use one himself. They have been sitting at the table quietly smoking for mere minutes when Joyce jumps up from her chair and suggests some eggnog.

"I made it myself," she points out, filling their mugs. "Unfortunately, the mashed potatoes I made tonight had the same consistency." For the first time that night, she looks directly at him, and the warmth in her eyes catches him off guard.

With the hope of regaining his composure, Hopper takes a drink, and is pleased to discover that Joyce has not gone easy on the rum. "Well, I hope you don't mind me barging in on you like this, given that you've obviously been waiting a few months for tonight." His gaze wanders to the multi-coloured glow illuminating the living room. Joyce is puzzled for a moment, then catching on to the joke, she begins to chuckle. "I guess I did get into the Christmas spirit a little early this year, huh? I suppose that's why you came by tonight, just to make some stupid crack about the lights?"

"To be honest, Joyce," Jim sighed. "I'm not entirely sure why I came by. All I know is that it's good to hear you laugh."

"And sing, right?"

"Umm...sure."

Notes for the Chapter:

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2. Because the Night

Joyce locked up the store for the evening - her third close this week. Since Will's release from hospital, she's been picking up as many shifts as possible to help cover the medical expenses. Considering all the time she spends working to support her family, it frustrates her to see so little of them. Jonathan, reliable and independent, is already more of an adult than his father ever was, and soon he'll be leaving home - a fact she tries to think about as little as possible.

As troubled as she is by the burgeoning manhood of her eldest son, Joyce is perhaps even more alarmed by her growing suspicion that something is very wrong with Will. After his return from the Upside Down, Joyce had been prepared for her younger boy to be tearful or frightened at times; no one could survive such torture without experiencing some lingering trauma. But Will is neither sad, nor scared; he's just withdrawn, which is somehow more unnerving.

He used to draw colourful wizards and dragons at the kitchen table; now he retreats to his room for hours at a time. Joyce was once his favourite art critic, but he hasn't shown her any of his work in weeks. When she casually brings this up to him he looks confused and apologizes, but nothing more comes of it.

The night is clear and bitterly cold. Joyce, with only her old winter coat for protection, braces herself against the icy damp that gnaws at every inch of her exposed skin. She walks the two blocks to her parked car, gets in and with shaking, ungloved hands turns the key in the ignition. Nothing. Not even that dreadful, high-pitched about-to-turn-over sound. "Shit!" she hisses. "Come on!" She tries the key a few more times, but she already knows that the battery is dead.

It's unlikely that Jonathan will be home from the movie yet, but Joyce decides to try calling him anyway. In a payphone across the street, she lights a smoke and dials the number. No answer. "Christ," she groans, taking a drag and leaning against the frosty wall of the booth. It's not even seven o'clock yet, and already the main street of Hawkins is a ghost town.

She's walking back to give her car another try when she spots the

headlights of Hopper's Chevy Blazer rounding the corner. She should feel relieved – and she does – but she feels something else, too. Being a single mother in this town has drawn its share of derision and pity, and consequently, Joyce has grown to despise any situation where she could be perceived as a damsel in distress - any situation like this one. Hopper pulls over, and gets out of the truck, leaving the engine running. “Joyce, are you all right?”

Between the concerned look on his face, and the fact that he always looks so damned sexy in his uniform, Joyce isn't sure what is more distracting, but she's glad that she can safely attribute her shivering to the cold. “I'm fine. My car could use a boost,” she says, but as Jim stands there squinting at her with barely disguised amusement, she knows he's not buying her tough girl act. Instead, he nods towards his truck, and says, “Get in.”

Joyce tosses away her cigarette, trying for cool indifference. “So, am I being arrested, or do you seriously not have jumper cables?” she mutters, even as she is climbing into the passenger seat, emitting an involuntary sigh as her body adjusts to the warmth of the Chevy's interior.

Hopper eases behind the wheel and she can feel his eyes on her. “This is a pretty shitty night to be messing around with booster cables, don't you think, Joyce? You look half-frozen.” Sensing the hot prickle of sweat on her hands and throat, Joyce almost laughs out loud at the irony of Hopper's observation. “Thanks for the lift, Hop,” she says softly, still not meeting his glance.

They pull onto the road, radio playing quietly. The piano intro of Patti Smith's deliciously raw Springsteen cover starts and Joyce and Hopper both move to turn up the volume at the same time. Her breath catches as Jim's rough fingers graze the back of her hand to adjust the dial. “I was just thinking that if you didn't like this song, I might have to kick you out of my truck,” he chuckles, then takes her fingers into his palm and moving his thumb across her skin says, “Your hands are almost thawed. That's good.”

Joyce can tell that Jim is trying to put her at ease, meaning she's not coming across as nonchalantly as she had hoped. He releases her hand and they fall back into silence, with only the song's seductive

refrain between them; Ms. Smith steadily growling “take me now.” Joyce steals a glance in Hopper’s direction, and wonders if the music is having the same lascivious effect on him as it is on her. While he’s focused on driving she takes the opportunity to more openly admire him: the strong, bearded jaw, the creases around his expressive blue eyes, the way his police-issue bomber jacket complements his broad shoulders.

“You’re awfully quiet tonight, Joyce,” Hopper says. “Is there something on your mind?” They pull up to a stoplight – one of the few in Hawkins – and Jim lights up a cigarette. He takes a drag, rolls down the window an inch, and gives her a meaningful look. “Well?” Joyce has been ruminating on the delicate sensation of Jim’s touch just moments before, and his question startles her. Not wanting to tell him what she’s really thinking, she blurts out, “I found something in Will’s room.”

Hopper pulls the Chevy to the side of the highway, giving Joyce his full attention. “Joyce, teenage boys tend to have a few things in their bedrooms that their mothers might not like to find.”

She finds his patronizing tone irksome. “Jesus Christ, Hopper, I have two sons - give me some credit, will you? I’m not talking about a porno magazine here. I found some.... drawings. And they really creeped me out.” Her defensiveness has had the desired effect because he unraises his eyebrows and loses the smirk. Joyce begins describing the set of charcoal pencils that Will got for Christmas, and how he’s been drawing with them almost exclusively since his return from the Upside Down. “But he would never show me what he was working on, so I didn’t know that he’s been sketching image after image of that awful place he was in. And that thing that took him – it was in some of the sketches, too – hiding behind trees, lurking in shadows...” Her voice trails off, then her tone darkens, “I don’t think this nightmare is over, but I don’t know what to do to stop it.”

Hopper puts his cigarette out in the ashtray, and resting a wrist on the steering wheel, draws a deep breath. After a considerable pause he says, “Well, Joyce, I wish I could tell you that you’re wrong about this, but I’m not going to make the mistake of doubting you again.” With that, he shifts the truck back into gear, and they drive the rest of the way to Joyce’s house without further mention of her disturbing

prophecy.

Hopper bids Joyce goodnight with a wisecrack about investing in some gloves, and she thanks him again for the ride. Walking up to her front door, she feels slightly giddy breathing in the unforgiving cold; the January night stands in such stark contrast to the comfort of the Chevy, and to the kindness of her handsome companion.

3. This Must Be the Place

What was once habit has become ritual. Hopper waits until just before dusk, while there is still enough light to locate the small wooden case amid the snow and frost-crusts leaves. As always, he finds the box empty. This evening's offering consists of three sandwiches - two ham and cheese, one tuna salad - and the requisite four toasted waffles; it is the least he can do. He crouches in the near darkness to observe a moment of silence for two girls: the one he couldn't save, and the one he might have saved but didn't.

The hot mist of his breath bestows an aura of catharsis on the ceremony. On some nights these meditative pauses last but a few minutes; at other times an hour or more passes before Hopper remembers himself. Tonight, his penitent contemplation is interrupted by the crunch of car wheels on the gravel shoulder nearby. Hopper immediately recognizes the battered Ford of Jonathan Byers, the car's stereo blaring Talking Heads at peak volume. Jim begins to head back to his truck further up the road, hoping that the deepening twilight will serve as adequate cover for him to make his way undetected.

That Jonathan should appear in this desolate location at this time of night is not especially alarming - he and his camera tend to wander at will - but Hopper is a bit surprised to note that the boy has arrived here with company; Nancy Wheeler, no less. The teenagers exit the car and enter the woods, their flashlight a single beam in the pitch. Hopper can make out snatches of their conversation. "I think I found it...do you think you'd recognize it?" Jonathan is saying. "I think so...I was so scared....head too messed up to remember maybe," comes Nancy's muttered reply.

Their voices get further away and now Hopper can only decipher a few words here and there, "Barb," "gate," "Upside Down," "here somewhere." Jim's thoughts turn to Joyce's assertion that things with the Upside Down remain unsettled. Stumbling across the ditch to his vehicle, he gets behind the wheel and heads in the direction of the Byers' residence. Although Joyce's car is parked in the driveway, there is no answer to Hopper's first two knocks at the door.

On his third attempt, the door opens. Joyce has evidently been sleeping. Her dark hair is a tousled mess and she's still in her unflattering work slacks, but Hopper hardly notices. His eyes are drawn instead to her thin white camisole and the salacious discovery that she is braless. "Shit, Hop, I thought you were Will," she says, around a yawn. "He's forgotten his house key a few times lately." Jim is so distracted by the outline of Joyce's breasts that he has almost forgotten why he showed up in the first place. Joyce, too sleep-fogged to perceive Hopper drinking her in, grumbles, "Well, close the door already. It's cold out there." He suppresses the urge to say, "I noticed."

The top half of Joyce's uniform has been thrown across the back of the couch, along with her pale pink bra. For a moment Hopper lets his mind drift to the pleasant image of the pretty brunette returning from work, tossing aside her constrictive clothing, and collapsing onto the sofa. His reverie is soon dismissed as a more alert Joyce removes the conspicuous items to her bedroom, calling over her shoulder, "so what brings you out here tonight?"

"I wanted to have a look at Will's drawings – the ones you told me about. I overheard something that got me thinking." As Hopper is speaking, Joyce wanders from her bedroom into that of her youngest son. She returns to the living room with a sheaf of paper in one hand, having changed out of her slacks into pajama bottoms. Her camisole - Hopper is disappointed to note - has been replaced with an oversized t-shirt.

Joyce hands Hopper the drawings, and settling down onto the couch beside him, lights up a cigarette. "The good news is that he's making real progress with charcoal," she remarks, drily. "The bad news is that every one of these pictures scares the hell out of me." Jim examines each sketch in turn, his brow furrowed. Will's colourless illustrations have perfectly captured the horror and the beauty of the Upside Down: stark, strange, real and unreal.

"Hopper, would you mind telling me what you're looking for here?" Joyce interjects just as Jonathan's car can be heard pulling into the driveway. "Maybe we should put these away," she suggests, but as she moves to gather the drawings, Jonathan abruptly enters the house, slams the door and strides to his room without a glance in

their direction.

Joyce looks at Hopper, with a raised eyebrow and an exaggerated shrug. Jim instinctively attributes Jonathan's behaviour to "girl trouble," and is not surprised to hear the sudden, heavy drop of needle on vinyl: the same wistful Talking Heads track he heard blasting from the Ford earlier. Extinguishing her cigarette in a nearby ashtray, Joyce begins to leaf through the drawings. After a moment she stops, a hand clapped to her mouth.

Hopper says her name, and when Joyce turns to him, her eyes are fearful. "I haven't seen this one yet," she says in a near whisper. "Do you see this figure here? This almost looks like her...like Eleven." The figure is a child, taller than Will, with close-cropped hair, wearing a knee-length dress. Jim is speechless. As far as Joyce knows, Eleven was killed by the creature while protecting Will's friends, and they have barely spoken of the girl since: Hopper too guilt-stricken to bring her up, and Joyce too saddened by Eleven's fate to speculate on what might have been.

Dr. Brenner has made it clear to Hopper that discretion is essential to their bargain, but Jim has no real interest in keeping secrets for that son of a bitch; he has his own reasons for withholding the truth. Joyce's voice interrupts his thoughts: "She's alive, isn't she, Hop?" Her expression is curious, but not unkind. "I know why you did it," she says. "And I'm grateful to you for choosing Will, but if Eleven is out there somewhere, then..."

"Then to paraphrase a friend, this nightmare isn't over," Hopper says softly. He knows he can't meet her tearful gaze without betraying his own emotion. He needs to leave, he needs a drink, and he is just about to make his escape when Joyce seizes his hand with an unexpectedly firm grip.

"Don't," she murmurs, the dread and sadness gone from her tone. "Whatever role those bastards have made you play in this thing... you didn't start this." For once, Hopper is unable to break the tension with a clever remark. Instead, it is Joyce who knows just what to say: "You came here tonight looking for something. What was it?" She hasn't relinquished his hand, and from the earnest look on her face, Hopper can discern that she's in no mood for bullshit.

“I figured that if I could just make it right, you’d never have to know.” When he looks at her, she is biting her lip to suppress a smile. “So basically, everything’s as fucked up as ever,” he smirks. Surprising himself, he kisses her then, and Joyce responds with scarcely disguised fervour, until the spell is broken by the sound of Will’s footfall on the front step. They fall back against the couch, and with shy smiles, wait for their respective pulses to slow to normal.

Notes for the Chapter:

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4. Edge of Seventeen

Joyce is perched on a stool in aisle two, pricing gun in hand, staring down a stack of boxed chocolate bunnies. She is confounded by the absurdity of human tradition, but in the back of her mind she hears the voice her eye-rolling, teenaged self, “Rabbits and eggs are natural symbols of rebirth. Our mythologies are who we are.” As a girl, Joyce was obsessed with the writings of Joseph Campbell, and taken with anything pagan in nature. While most girls in her class were daydreaming to Connie Francis, Joyce wandered Hawkins like a sort of adolescent Wednesday Addams, cigarette in one hand, ragged Tolkien paperback in the other.

She has been contemplating her youth a lot recently; to her surprise and chagrin, Hopper’s incendiary kiss has left her puzzled and pining like a lovelorn teenager. Unaccustomed to frivolous thinking, Joyce wonders if she’s reading too much into it. With his reputation, it’s likely that Hopper has kissed a dozen women in the past six months alone; why should this mean anything? But if Joyce is being honest with herself, the only thing making tonight’s shift bearable – aside from the always-excellent Stevie Nicks on the radio – is her ongoing contemplation of Jim’s lips on her own.

That Hopper should be the one to bring these long-buried yearnings to the surface of Joyce’s conscience is no accident; it is hardly a secret that since his return to Hawkins, he has occupied a dark place, and Joyce has always been fascinated by darkness. This dangerous attraction was what originally drew her to Lonnie: she mistook his cruelty and cynicism for depth and insight, and they dated for six months before she mustered the nerve to call it off. During this first of many break-ups, Hopper asked her on their only date.

Hopper was what people of the time called a “catch”: good looking, good manners, good grades, and good prospects. When he asked her out, Joyce initially took it for a joke. Jim was popular and tended to date popular girls. While Joyce wasn’t disliked, most people considered her too peculiar to be desirable. With the exception of Lonnie, boys paid her little attention. She and Hopper had some classes together, and he often asked her about the book she was

reading, or referred to a quote that she had scribbled into her notebook. She assumed that he was simply being friendly, because that's just how he was. In the end, she agreed to the date, if only to satiate her own curiosity.

Recalling that night, Joyce almost laughs out loud at how clichéd it was – like a scene out of American Graffiti or an episode of Happy Days: burgers and milkshakes at the diner, followed by the requisite “parking” at the Point. But clichéd or no, her date with Hopper still stood out as one of the most fun, romantic evenings of her life. He was everything that Lonnie wasn't - light-hearted, funny, confident – and he made Joyce feel more interesting and attractive than she was accustomed to feeling. He liked things that she liked – Hitchcock, The Twilight Zone, Etta James – and he expressed his enthusiasm for these interests without a trace of the scorn that tended to permeate Lonnie's worldview.

Sitting in his car at the Point, they shared a cigarette, Hopper's arm draped casually over the back of her seat. His tall frame was leaner then, his eyes less guarded, and Joyce felt flushed just looking at him. When he pulled her in for a kiss, it was as though every inch of her skin caught fire. They soon found themselves in the backseat, Hopper fumbling with the buttons on her blouse with one hand, inching his way up her bare inner thigh with the other.

He stopped suddenly and Joyce couldn't help her reaction: she flinched. During their intimate moments, Lonnie frequently accused Joyce of “throwing him off” by making an unexpected sound or movement. Joyce assumed that she had elicited a similar reaction in Jim, but when she met his glance she was caught off guard by the tenderness there. Nodding in the direction of his wandering hands, he said, “Is this okay?” Joyce had never been considered in this way before. Hopper's gesture of concern so touched her that she feared she might burst into tears if she tried to speak, so she just smiled and nodded.

They began to kiss again, Hopper's hand moving further between her legs. Joyce let out a little laugh as he roughly kissed her neck then pulled at her bra strap with his teeth. As Jim's fingers slid into her panties, he emitted a small groan at discovering how wet she was. Joyce was desperately trying to make as little noise as possible. She

hated to admit it, but Lonnie's hurtful words resonated in her head even as she was panting under Jim's touch: "Only sluts enjoy it. But hey, you're damaged goods, aren't you?"

She gasped with pleasure as Hopper slipped one, then two fingers inside of her, and she bit her lip self-consciously. Counterpoint to Lonnie's degrading words, Jim's hot breath was at her ear, "it's okay to like it, you know." Granted permission, Joyce did like it, raking her fingers through Hopper's hair, pulling him towards her exposed breast and moaning at the sensation of his lips closing over her nipple...

"Joyce."

It was not Hopper's voice.

Startled back into the present-day, she looked up into the stern, questioning face of her boss. "What exactly has that poor Easter bunny done to justify having its face obliterated by no fewer than two dozen price tags?" Donald says, gesturing at the box in her hand. Blushing, Joyce realized that, in the course of her reminiscing, she has been smacking the pricing gun against the same chocolate bunny for about twenty minutes.

Donald shakes his head, but smiles at her, and wanders back towards the front of the store. With her boss out of sight, Joyce tosses the bunny and gun aside and heads out back for a smoke. The late-March damp is almost pleasant as she lights up, glancing aimlessly around the alley. She is about to continue her sexy recollections when she spots someone rummaging through the dumpster behind the coffee shop two doors down - someone in a pink dress, white sneakers and a blue jacket.

Without hesitation, Joyce runs towards the girl, but Eleven is already retreating, her eyes wary. "El, please. I want to help you." Eleven shakes her head vigorously. Her hair has grown out somewhat, her face a mess of dirt and scratches. She runs, and disappears as if into thin air.

Notes for the Chapter:

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5. More Than This

The black car pulls to a whisper-quiet stop two blocks from the police station, an unnecessary security measure given that it's almost eight o'clock at night; encountering anyone in downtown Hawkins at this hour is beyond unlikely. Each time that Dr. Brenner's vile people deposit him back in town, Hopper becomes more grateful for the bottle of bourbon he keeps tucked away in his desk.

Brenner goes through the motions, always asking the same questions: Has he or anyone else seen the girl? Does he have any reason to think she is still alive? Has he assisted her survival in any way, providing shelter, sustenance or medical attention? Jim wonders how much they already know, if they're simply testing him to flex their might, to scare him off of any further vigilante behaviour.

Hopper lights a much-needed cigarette and wearily ascends the steps of the station house, hoping that whoever is working tonight leaves him the hell alone. Officer Powell, at his desk reading over an accident report, looks up when Jim comes in, his face concerned. "Hey Chief, where have you been? Did you have your radio off or something?"

"Jesus, Powell, what are you my mother?" Hopper mutters. That bourbon is looking better and better. "There doesn't seem to be too much happening. What'd I miss?"

"Joyce Byers was here looking for you about an hour ago. She was pretty shaken up, said she needed to speak with you right away. We tried your radio probably six or seven times, but after a while, she just went home."

Jim's mind races with all the reasons Joyce might have for showing up at the station. To suppress his rising panic, he takes a drag before speaking. "Were you able to find out what the trouble was? How did she seem when she left?"

"She only wanted to talk to you, sir. I told her to go home and that we'd keep trying to reach you. That calmed her down a bit, but like I said, she was rattled."

"All right," Hopper replies, trying for a casual tone. "I'll look into it." He arrives at Joyce's house less than three minutes later, committing no fewer than ten traffic violations in the process. Jonathan answers the door with a quiet "hey, Hop." Will is focussed on a game of Mario Bros., and greets him without turning away from the screen, "Hi, sir. Mom's in the shower."

"Huh," Hopper remarks, stealing a glance in Jonathan's direction. The older boy is wearing a subtle smirk, clearly aware that right now Jim is picturing Joyce naked, hot water cascading over her body. Despite the cold night, Hopper is feeling very warm. As he removes his hat and coat, he asks Jonathan how his mom is doing, hoping to distract the teenager's attention away from his own discomfort.

"She was kind of freaked out when she got home. I told her she looked like she'd seen a ghost - you know, as a joke. She told me that in a way she had. Then she went right to her room. Did something bad happen?" Jonathan must be worried; it's rare for Hopper to get more than a dozen words out of him.

Bryan Ferry's sultry croon can be heard from the transistor radio on the kitchen counter, his sexy delivery providing the perfect soundtrack as Joyce wanders into the living room, towel-drying her hair with her head tipped forward. "Jonathan, was there someone at the door just now?" She flips her damp hair back, almost colliding with Hopper in the process. Jim knows he's staring but he can't help it. Clad in only a navy-blue terry robe, Joyce is exquisite: her dark eyes flashing, cheeks flushed, throat and chest still glistening with droplets of steam.

"I heard you were looking for me down at the station," he remarks, his eyes following the path of a tiny rivulet of water trickling down between Joyce's breasts. He tries with little success to ignore the stirrings of his arousal. Joyce's face is serious as she nods towards the hallway, and Hopper follows her into the bedroom. She gently closes the door and sits down on her bed, near tears. "Joyce, what is it? What's wrong?"

Taking a smoke from a pack on the bedside table, she lights up with trembling hands. "I saw her tonight, Hop. I saw Eleven, and she was...oh my God, she looked so scared and alone! I tried to stop her,

but she took off before I could talk to her.” The tears are flowing freely now, and Hopper, settling down on the bed, removes the cigarette from between her fingers, places it in an ashtray, and draws Joyce to his chest. She sobs quietly for several moments, until her shivering body relaxes in his arms. “It would be bad enough if those animals at the lab had gotten to her, but this is worse, somehow. Have you seen her? Do you know where she is?”

Wriggling out of Hopper’s grasp, she fixes him with her intense gaze. “Well, yes and no,” he says, explaining about the box in the woods. “Trust me, I’ve been out there tons of times, but if she was nearby, I never saw her.”

“Please take me there. I need to see for myself. She was so desperate, Hopper. Hungry, cold...frightened out of her mind! You wanted to make this right. Let me help you,” Joyce’s hand is on his thigh, imploring. He nods solemnly, placing his hand over hers, “Okay, Joyce.”

She wipes her eyes with the sleeve of her robe, and now the expression on her face has changed; she refuses to meet his gaze. “Listen, Hop, could we talk about the other night...” Since the evening he kissed her, Jim has imagined this conversation countless times. He knows what she is going to say. She won’t be cast aside like all the others. Her sons have been through enough without having the Hawkins rumour mill on their back. She’s gotten this far without a man, so if this is just going to be some sympathy fuck, then he should just leave now.

He audibly exhales, grappling for the right words, but before he can speak, Joyce gestures for him to stay quiet. “Those little buggers are listening out in the hallway!” she hisses, jumping up from the bed, and throwing open the door. Sure enough, both boys are standing there, looking sheepish. “What are you guys doing sneaking around out here?”

Hopper is standing next to Joyce now, noting the domestic intimacy of their situation. It occurs to him that even this moment of familial conflict feels comforting in contrast to the emptiness to which he has grown accustomed.

Jonathan is clutching a pair of black and white photographs in his hand. "We were just about to knock," he tells Joyce. "You were upset, so we just wanted to make sure you were okay. Where was Eleven when you saw her?"

"Look, Jonathan, I know you want to help, but the people who created Eleven are dangerous, and I'd prefer it if you and Will weren't involved." Joyce moves to close the door, but her elder son presses it back open. "No offense, Mom, but we are already involved." Jonathan hands his mother his photos, pointing out that they were taken on two separate days. The shots are both of Eleven in the same location: in one, she can be seen crouching by the house, in the other she is standing on the front step, pulling open the door to enter.

"Wow, Hop," Joyce remarks. "I guess those sandwiches you've been making haven't been cutting it. Perhaps she's been breaking into your place to raid your fridge?"

Notes for the Chapter:

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6. Brass in Pocket

Armed with the knowledge that Eleven has been secretly frequenting his house, Hopper is resolved to spend the next night at home, hoping to encounter her. Naturally, Joyce insists on being part of the young fugitive's recovery, and just as predictably, Jim protests on the grounds that the "ruthless people" involved in Eleven's case pose too great a risk to Joyce's safety. Hopper's overprotective warning is dismissed with some colourful language from Joyce, and now they will be pursuing the night's adventure together.

When the evening arrives, much as she hates to admit it, Joyce has more than just the mission on her mind. She hopes that the boys haven't detected her anxiety, and over dinner, is pleased to note that Will is behaving almost like his former self, chatty and enthusiastic about the evening's plan. Perhaps the possibility of finding Eleven is putting her son's mind at ease, and soon he'll begin drawing in colour again, the Upside Down left behind for good. She is ruminating on these pleasant thoughts when Will suddenly blurts out, "Mom, isn't it exciting that you and the Chief are having a sleepover to catch Eleven?" Joyce laughs and blushes. Jonathan nearly chokes on his Pepsi.

Her eldest son is still recovering when Joyce calmly explains that it's not a sleepover "it's more like a stakeout," but that "yes, it is exciting because it will be good to know that Eleven is safe and no longer alone." Fortunately, this awkward line of conversation is interrupted by Hopper's knock at the door, and Joyce rises to answer it, mustering her composure by repeating the words "it's like a stakeout" in her head several times.

Hopper gives her an appreciative, unsubtle onceover as she opens the door, and she experiences a warm rush of pleasure. Taking note of Jim's recently trimmed beard, Joyce hides a smile as she pulls on her coat, grabs her bag and heads out into the night ahead of him. They climb into the Chevy and drive in silence, listening to the radio. Joyce's déjà vu is so strong that she half expects to hear Patti Smith's piano start pouring out of the speakers; but instead, it is the strut and purr of Chrissie Hynde, insisting in no uncertain terms that she will

do whatever it takes to “make you notice” that she’s “special, so special.” Joyce impulsively cranks the volume, and Hopper laughs, “whoa, Joyce! You like this one, huh? It’s pretty...sexy.” He glances at her and she looks right back at him, eyebrows raised; even locking eyes with Jim in this moment feels brazen, reckless.

He parks the truck at a discreet distance from his place and they set out to walk in the cool spring night. Joyce wonders aloud what they are planning to do if Eleven shows up, and Hopper assures her that he has all the necessary provisions: clothing, first aid, waffles. Joyce chuckles but remembering her confrontation with El in the alley, feels a little panicked. “What if she tries to run? What if she...lashes out at us?”

“Look, Joyce, considering that I’m already on Brenner’s radar, Eleven has taken an enormous risk in choosing my house as a place of refuge. I know this doesn’t make much sense, but I think it’s possible that she sees me as some sort of ally - I’m kind of counting on it, actually.” When they arrive at Hopper’s house, Joyce’s heart skips; she has never been here before, and Jim has never invited her, always with the excuse that he still hasn’t gotten around to fixing the place up after tearing it apart in search of surveillance devices. Joyce suspects that he has had other reasons for keeping her away, but that isn’t really her business, is it?

Once inside, Hopper does a quick scan of the living room with his flashlight. Even with little illumination, Joyce can tell that he has taken care to make the space presentable: a blanket covering the torn couch, the coffee table clear of debris, ashtrays emptied. Joyce settles down onto the sofa, and after removing her coat and boots, lights a cigarette. Hopper wanders off to search the rest of the house, eventually returning to the living room, the flashlight switched off. Taking a seat next to Joyce, he carefully maneuvers a tumbler of whiskey into her hand.

They smoke and drink for a moment, lost in their own thoughts. When Jim speaks, his voice sounds far away. “Joyce, I’ve been meaning to find the right time to say this, but the opportunity never seems to be presenting itself so I’m just going to say it.” He takes a long drag and finishes off his drink before continuing. “I haven’t given a shit about anything in a really long time. I don’t even know if

this will matter to you or not, but I care about you, and I care about your boys. The way you look at me...it's almost like how people used to look at me before..."

The final words catch in his throat, and Joyce mentally fills in the blanks. "Before we lost Sarah." "Before Diane left me." "Before booze, drugs and indiscriminate sex became the answer to questions I'd long stopped asking." Although her coping methods have not mirrored Hopper's, Joyce recognizes parts of herself in his confession: the feelings of shame and desperation; the consequent self-flagellation is all too familiar. Their hands find each other in the darkness, and she surprises herself by boldly climbing into his lap.

"Joyce, you don't have to prove anything to me," he whispers, but she is already taking his earlobe between her teeth, her fingers stroking the tears from his face. She is straddling him now, fusing her mouth to his as he reaches down to cup her ass. Her hands are working at the buttons on his flannel shirt, while his are roaming under her blouse. As the kiss deepens, Joyce begins to lose her patience, murmuring, "I hope this isn't one of your favourites," before tearing his shirt open, the buttons falling into the couch and onto the carpet.

Jim stops kissing her long enough to gasp, "I think it just became one of my favourites." He has undone enough of her blouse to pull it over her head and toss it to the floor. She revels in the sensation of his soft lips on her shoulder, the roughness of his beard against her skin as he traces a path down her chest. "My God, Joyce, you're so beautiful," he growls. "I need to look at you. We need light if we're going to..." He is suddenly on his feet, tossing her over his shoulder and carrying her to the bedroom.

Joyce giggles as Hopper flings her softly onto the bed. She lies back, listening to him moving around the room. Having checked that the blinds and curtains are tightly closed, he lights a single candle on top of his dresser, and in the low light Joyce observes that the bedroom has been tidied with considerable attention: no dirty laundry on the floor, the bed made with what appears to be freshly cleaned sheets. Lying down next to her, Hopper takes Joyce by the arm and, pulling her on top of him, removes her bra. Joyce feels almost faint with arousal as Jim's fingers roughly pinch her nipples while his tongue

explores her mouth.

Joyce wants him on top and rolls back onto the bed, regarding Jim with undisguised lust as he removes his shirt, then pulls off her jeans and panties. Joyce's first instinct is to tug the blanket over her nakedness, over the stretch marks, over the less-than-smooth parts, but one glance at Jim's face changes her mind: with his ravenous eyes and irrepressible grin, he has the look of a man who has just won the lottery. He starts to kiss her neck, his hand gently stroking the hair between her legs; the torment is exquisite.

Hopper is fingering her now and Joyce's impatience for his cock is becoming excruciating. "Jesus, Hopper," she gasps, "don't make me beg for it." Not having to be asked twice, he stands up and finishes undressing, his arousal unmistakable. Joyce crawls to the edge of the bed, and takes him into her mouth, savouring his salty sweetness and the impossibly erotic sound of his quickening breath. Unable to take any more, he places his hands on her shoulders and gives her an aggressive push back onto the bed.

Jim groans as he eases into her, moving slowly against her hips for a few thrusts until Joyce whispers into his ear, "please don't go easy on me." He draws back to meet her gaze, an amused smirk on his face. "Joyce, is that some kind of challenge?" In response to her eager nod, he pulls out, rolls her over and proceeds to take her forcefully from behind. He knows just what she wants, gripping her hips and pushing himself deeper with every thrust, occasionally giving her ass a sharp smack. Soon she is coming hard, moaning his name, her pussy throbbing around his cock until her whole body feels deliciously defeated. Joyce rolls onto her back and Hopper penetrates her again, grinding himself into her with hard, fast strokes that gradually slow as he reaches climax with a guttural sigh.

Jim collapses next to her, and for a while they lay together, sharing a cigarette, happily saying nothing. She leaves the bedroom to wash up, and when she returns Hopper is already tucked under the covers, quietly snoring. She extinguishes the candle and as she slips into bed beside him, his arm reaches out to pull her close. She soon drops off to sleep, her cheek nestled against his chest.

Their slumber is disturbed by neither the rain that begins to fall

shortly after midnight, nor by the soft click of the latch as the front door is opened then gently closed with barely a sound.

Notes for the Chapter:

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7. Hungry Heart

The room is so dark that at first Hopper struggles to determine the time of day. Freezing rain crackles against the window as Joyce's pulse whispers against his skin, her back pressed to his chest, his hand at her waist. Running a thumb along her hip and trailing his fingers over her outer thigh, Jim wants nothing more than to spend the whole day like this: breathing in her warmth while outside the world is gradually coated in ice. Joyce moans softly, takes his roaming hand into her own, and settles back into sleep. For a moment Hopper envisions the many wicked ways that he could wake her up, but listening to her peaceful breathing, reconsiders.

Disentangling himself from their embrace, Jim goes to the window, briefly observing the slate-grey sky of an overcast morning before pulling on his jeans and wandering out of the bedroom towards the kitchen. His mind is on coffee, contemplation and a cigarette, but he stops short when he hears an unusual noise coming from the front of the house.

As he approaches the living room, Hopper can distinguish the alternate grumbling and whistling of static from two sources: his two-way radio and an old transistor. Smiling to himself, Jim murmurs, "Clever girl." Eleven, using her cursory knowledge of radio technology, is attempting to communicate with her young allies. It is unlikely that she is familiar with the concept of frequencies, but there's a good chance that her unique gifts will make complete understanding unnecessary.

Lying on the couch with her eyes closed, she tunes the transistor first, moving the dial hands-free, working her strange magic. Unable to find the connection she seeks, Eleven instead settles on an FM station playing the Boss, listening with curiosity until the song ends, then abruptly clicking the machine off. Hopper is just about to address her, but now she is trying the two-way radio, her mind purposefully searching the airwaves until the static clears and the voices of Mike and Lucas can be heard, discussing their latest campaign. Eleven is silent, her attention focused. Jim expects her to speak, to reach out to the boys, but she says nothing, her expression paralyzed by sadness

and fear.

Not wanting to startle her, Hopper says her name as softly as he can. The two-way radio shuts off, and she is immediately on her feet, her face wet with tears, her eyes frightened and fierce. Jim puts his hands up in a gesture of peace or surrender – he isn't sure which. They spend a long time quietly appraising each other: Eleven understandably wary - any man seeking her trust might also be seeking her submission; Hopper conscious that young girls – telekinetic or otherwise - possess a strength that few give them credit for.

“I could show you how it works, if you want,” he offers. “The two-way radio, I mean. The transistor probably won't help you very much, although there's nothing like a bit of Springsteen to take the edge off.” Hopper chuckles for a moment at his stupid joke until Eleven's withering glare shuts him up. “You're trying to reach your friends, right? Dustin, Lucas and, what's his name – Mike? That's a pretty risky plan. I can help you, but you're going to have to stop looking at me like that.”

At the mention of the last boy's name, Eleven's eyes brighten, as though Jim has uttered some secret password, but her face quickly resumes its guarded expression, her gaze hovering somewhere over Hopper's shoulder. He turns around, surprised to see Joyce standing in the hallway. She has hastily dressed in her jeans and one of his T-shirts, and looks both elated and terrified at the sight of the girl. “Hop, I heard you talking to somebody. I had no idea that...is everything okay? El, are you okay?”

Eleven nods slowly and Jim sighs, exchanging a confused glance with Joyce. He tries a different tactic, “Look, El, would you like something to eat? Then maybe we can figure out some way to contact Mike - safely.” The girl turns to look at him, her expression impassive but unafraid; he knows that she will not run.

In the kitchen, Hopper opens his freezer, which Joyce notes contains no fewer than ten boxes of waffles. She can't help but laugh. “I'm sorry, Hopper,” she says. “It's just really sweet to see how dedicated you've been.” He puts two Eggos into the toaster then turns to Joyce, and pressing her against the counter whispers, “I'll show you

dedication.” Jim’s hands reach down behind her knees, lifting her up and setting her down next to the sink. He stands between her legs, grinding his burgeoning arousal against the crotch of her jeans, and kissing her mouth with increasing intensity until Joyce pushes him back lightly. “Hop, Eleven is in the next room. Where do you keep your coffee?”

Fifteen minutes later, Hopper is sitting at his kitchen table in a state of bewilderment, watching Eleven greedily consume her fourth waffle. Joyce takes a sip of her coffee and looks at him with a bemused look, equally conscious of the surreal circumstances, then turns her attention to their young companion, “El, how would you feel about a warm shower and some clean clothes? I could give you a hand, if you like.” Jim admires Joyce’s attempt at practicality, knowing that her first instinct upon encountering Eleven was probably to throw her arms around the poor girl and embrace her for a good, long while. How does one properly mother a child who has never known a mother before? Joyce tries to take the girl’s hand, but Eleven recoils with a look of mild panic.

Thus rebuffed, Joyce shoots a nervous glance at Hopper, who is now regretting that they didn’t plan this out better – not that he has a single regret about what they did instead. His mind drifts to images of last night: her in his lap, the hungry look in her eyes, her mouth around his...

Joyce is really giving him a glare now so he tries to put these thoughts aside by lighting a smoke. Taking a quick sip of coffee, he says, “Eleven, I’m aware of the danger you’re in. I’ve been dealing with these sons of... uh, bad people for a while now and I know you’re hardly old enough to be handling them on your own. We want to protect you. Will you let us help you?” The girl examines both adults in turn then begins to shiver uncontrollably. Joyce moves towards the child but Eleven will not be comforted. “El, what is it? What’s the matter?”

Fixing Joyce with tearful eyes, Eleven speaks, her voice barely a whisper, “A gate is open. Will is not safe.”

Notes for the Chapter:

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